

Blighted Property Review Committee
Tuesday, March 4, 2008
Minutes

Members Present: Lee Olsen, Wayne Jonas Bealer, Mary Wolfe, Manuel Candelario

Staff Present: Jatinder Khokhar, Steve Franco, Michelle Mayfield, Andrew Miller, Linda Kelleher,

Others Present: Berks County CD Director Ken Pick, Carlos Cognata

Mr. Olsen called the meeting to order at 6:15 p.m.

Public Comment

Mr. Carlos Cognata, investor from King of Prussia, stated that he owned properties in the 300 block of North 4th Street and was here to observe.

Approval of the Agenda and the February Meeting Minutes

Mr. Olsen asked the Committee to consider the agenda for this meeting and the minutes from the February meeting.

Mr. Bealer requested a correction on page 3, under New Business as follows:

Mr. Bealer presented useful background information on the steps associated with ~~existing eminent domain procedures~~ *creating a redevelopment zone* and provided each member of the committee with a flow chart detailing the process.

He also noted the need for some grammatical corrections that will be provided to Ms. Kelleher.

Mr. Candelario moved, seconded by Ms. Wolfe, to approve the agenda for this meeting and the minutes from the February meeting as amended and corrected.

719-721 Laurel Street

County Community Development Director Ken Pick reported on the vast number of quality of life problems centered in the 700 block of Laurel Street that were brought to his attention by Correstacks, who asked for assistance from the

County's Acquisition, Demolition, Disposition (ADD) Program. Correstacks wishes to demolish the blighted properties on the north side of the 700 block of Laurel Street and improve the vacated lots for off street parking.

Mr. Pick stated that the majority of the properties have been acquired and demolished but the owners of 719 and 721 are unwilling to sell. A new owner has expressed interest in rehabilitating these properties. Mr. Pick explained that these properties were ravaged by a fire. He reported that only minor repairs have been made to the exterior and roof but the interior remains gutted. He reported that the first floor is also unsecured. He distributed photographs of these properties. Mr. Pick explained the ADD approach to obtaining blighted properties.

Mr. Franco reported that the owner has been given a notice to rehabilitate or demolish within 20 days. If the property owner does not respond the City will seek demolition through the Court system. Additional information will be available next week.

Mr. Miller noted that Correstacks plan to use the vacated lots for parking may not comply with the City's zoning ordinance. He noted the need for Correstacks to obtain Zoning and Planning approval before construction can occur.

Mr. Olsen thanked Mr. Pick for his report and asked City staff to report on this issue at the April meeting.

Demolition

Mr. Khokhar explained that many properties ripe for demolition are identified through complaint. He stated that during 2007 twenty-seven properties were demolished. Mr. Franco stated that the cost of the demolition varies from property to property based on the size, condition, location and style (single family detached, semi-detached, etc.). He reported that approximately \$500,000 (CDBG and General Fund) is budgeted annually for demolitions.

Mr. Pick added that approximately \$200,000 of the County's annual CDBG allocation is budgeted for the ADD program. He reported that ADD has demolished 186 properties to date. He noted that the ADD uses an "agreeable sale" approach and does not undertake harder practices like eminent domain. Mr. Franco noted the importance of the ADD program.

Mr. Khokhar provided clarification on the process to notify the property owner and the numerous steps that must be taken before demolition can occur. Mr. Franco explained the City's complaint management system. He noted the need for

City Codes Inspectors to broaden their focus to identify these problem properties while they are working in the neighborhoods. Mr. Khokhar asked committee members to bring problem properties to the City's attention.

Mr. Olsen suggested that the committee meet in a retreat to define the committee's goals, study the available data and ultimately define the first phase of a plan to address blight.

Mr. Khokhar explained that the city has obtained the data needed from Greater Valley Consultants (GVC) and IT is currently working to generate a program that will combine GVC data along with data from ADD and the City.

Mr. Bealer suggested that the Committee use a tiered approach similar to that used in Buffalo, New York. Ms. Wolfe agreed that a retreat would enable the Committee to establish a good and workable plan. She suggested utilizing a facilitator.

Mr. Khokhar noted the need for a plan that works to correct individual blighted properties and apply wholesale demolition where necessary.

Mr. Bealer noted the approach used in the Bronx to rehabilitate properties using public and private investment.

Mr. Olsen inquired if the City will provide the committee with access to the GIS maps that will combine the data from GVC, ADD and the City. After studying this information the committee will prepare a plan that will address concentrations and pockets of blight. Mr. Franco stated that he will continue to work with IT to prepare the GIS information for distribution in April.

Mr. Pick reported that the effort to obtain the blighted properties on Benner's Court began approximately 20 years ago. Currently four properties are still controlled privately. Ms. Kelleher reported that the School Board and City Council discussed this acquisition at their February meeting and Mr. Churchill was instructed to speak with the Redevelopment Authority and Planning Commission about beginning eminent domain proceedings.

Mr. Pick stated that from this point forward he will provide Ms. Kelleher with monthly ADD reports for distribution to the Committee.

New Business

Mr. Cognata reported that three blighted and abandoned properties have been identified in the 300 block of North 4th Street and have become a public safety threat to the neighborhood.

Mr. Olsen expressed hope that as the committee matures and develops a plan of action, the meetings will be attended by the press and public. He suggested beginning a MAC program to explain the committee's mission after a plan is defined. He offered to speak with BCTV. It was also suggested that the committee make a presentation to the Council of Neighborhoods (CON) to make residents aware of the committee and its goals.

Ms. Wolfe inquired how the City handles property owners interested in rehabilitating blighted properties. Mr. Franco explained that rehabilitation plans must be included and be approved the City.

There was a discussion on the City's Comprehensive Plan and the need to reduce the housing density. Mr. Bealer stated that it would be ideal to demolish four to five row homes and re-parcel the lots to create three lots. It is believed that new development could be stimulated when blight is eliminated.

The committee also discussed the advantages and disadvantages of project funding through a line of credit. Mr. Pick reported that costs such as settlement fees and legal fees would never be recouped.

Mr. Bealer distributed a flow chart showing the blighted property review process for abandoned and non-abandoned properties. Mr. Franco explained the variables and the timelines used by the City for rehabilitation. He stated that generally 30 days is afforded to the property owner unless severe conditions exist. Mr. Khokhar and Mr. Franco noted that some property owners drag the City through lengthy court proceedings. Ms. Mayfield suggested that the committee develop a phased plan that includes timelines for rehabilitation.

Mr. Bealer noted the history of a severely deteriorated home located on Chestnut Street.

Staff Report

Ms. Kelleher stated that due to staff changes she will be working with the committee. She reported that when coming up to speed on the committee's activities she discovered that the letters inviting surrounding 3rd class cities to a Blighted Property Forum were not drafted or mailed out by the staff member

assigned to the committee. She stated that the letters have now been drafted and were taken to the Mayor's Office for his signature. She apologized for this oversight.

Mr. Candelario moved, seconded by Ms. Wolfe, to adjourn the March meeting.

Respectfully submitted by Linda A. Kelleher, City Clerk